

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Author: Nelle Harper Lee

Born: April 28, 1926 Monroeville, AL
Education: Huntington College, 1944-45,
University of Alabama 1945-49, and
Oxford University.

Name: Nelle Harper Lee
Born: 1926



Career:

Writer. Airline reservation clerk with Eastern Air Lines and British Overseas Airways, New York, NY, c. 1950s. Member, National Council on the Arts, 1966-72.

Awards:

Pulitzer Prize, Alabama Library Association Award, and Brotherhood Award of National Conference of Christians and Jews, all 1961, Best Sellers' Paperback of the Year Award, 1962, and Alabama Humanities Award, 2002, all for *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Quill Award for Audio, 2007, for audio version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Presidential Medal of Freedom, President George W. Bush, 2007.

Biography:

Born April 28, 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama, Nelle Harper Lee drew upon her own childhood experiences as the daughter of a lawyer in Alabama to create the fictional events in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Together with her brother and their childhood friend Truman Capote, Lee enjoyed many of the small-town adventures depicted in the novel; Capote would later base a character in his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, on Lee. Scout's troubles in school—she is so far advanced in reading that she finds her school work boring—reflects Lee's own childhood boredom with grade school. Lee's older sister, Sook, a recluse who rarely left the family house, shares many of the qualities exhibited by the character Boo. Lee's father, Amasa Coleman, served in the Alabama State Legislature from 1927 to 1939, and was the model for Atticus Finch. "Although Lee stressed that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not autobiographical," explained Altman, "she commented that a writer 'should write about what he [sic] knows and write truthfully.' The time period and setting of the novel obviously originated in the author's experience."

Lee began her writing career after leaving college in 1950 just before completing her law studies. While supporting herself in New York City as an airline reservation clerk, she sought the advice of a literary agent about her work. The agent advised her to expand one of the short stories she had written into the novel which became *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The process of writing the novel took several years. During this time Lee quit working, lived in a cold-water flat and was supported by friends who believed in her work. In 1957 she approached the publishing firm of Lippincott with the manuscript. Although editors criticized the novel's structure, which they felt read like a series of short stories strung together, they saw promise in the book and encouraged Lee to rewrite it. By 1960, with the help of Lippincott editor Tay Hohoff, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was finished.

Lee has counted among her favorite authors Charles Lamb, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jane Austen, and Thomas Love Peacock, as well as various religious writers of the nineteenth century. As Lee once commented: "Writing is the hardest thing in the world....but writing is the only thing that has made me completely happy."



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Despite her love of writing, continuing to work after publishing *To Kill a Mockingbird* proved to be somewhat intimidating for Lee. She began a second novel in 1961, writing from noon until early evening, and revising so extensively that she produced only one or two pages per day, but never presented this work for publication. In the early 1960s she penned several short essays and an article titled "Love—In Other Words" for popular magazines. However, Lee retired from literary activity by mid-decade. Despite the fact that its author's renown rests on a single book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* retains its place in the American literary canon. In more recent years Lee has divided her time between New York City and her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, where her sister, Alice Lee, practices as an attorney.



Reading Group Guide (1)

Spotlight on: *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Discussion Guide Questions from ReadingGroupGuides.com

1. How do Scout, Jem, and Dill characterize Boo Radley at the beginning of the book? In what way did Boo's past history of violence foreshadow his method of protecting Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell? Does this repetition of aggression make him more or less of a sympathetic character?
2. In Scout's account of her childhood, her father Atticus reigns supreme. How would you characterize his abilities as a single parent? How would you describe his treatment of Calpurnia and Tom Robinson vis-a-vis his treatment of his white neighbors and colleagues? How would you typify his views on race and class in the larger context of his community and his peers?
3. The title of Lee's book is alluded to when Atticus gives his children air rifles and tells them that they can shoot all the bluejays they want, but "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." At the end of the novel, Scout likens the "sin" of naming Boo as Bob Ewell's killer to "shootin' a mockingbird." Do you think that Boo is the only innocent, or mockingbird, in this novel?
4. Scout ages two years—from 6 to 8—over the course of Lee's novel, which is narrated from her perspective as an adult. Did you find the account her narrator provides believable? Were there incidents or observations in the book that seemed unusually "knowing" for such a young child? What event or episode in Scout's story do you feel truly captures her personality?
5. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been challenged repeatedly by the political left and right, who have sought to remove it from libraries for its portrayal of conflict between children and adults; ungrammatical speech; references to sex, the supernatural, and witchcraft; and unfavorable presentation of blacks. Which elements of the book—if any—do you think touch on controversial issues in our contemporary culture? Did you find any of those elements especially troubling, persuasive, or insightful?
6. Jem describes to Scout the four "folks" or classes of people in Maycomb County: "...our kind of folks don't like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don't like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks." What do you think of the ways in which Lee explores race and class in 1930s Alabama? What significance, if any, do you think these characterizations have for people living in other parts of the world?
7. One of the chief criticisms of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that the two central storylines—Scout, Jem, and Dill's fascination with Boo Radley and the trial between Mayella Ewell and Tom Robinson—are not sufficiently connected in the novel. Do you think that Lee is successful in incorporating these different stories? Were you surprised at the way in which these story lines were resolved? Why or why not?
8. By the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the book's first sentence: "When he was thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow," has been explained and resolved. What did you think of the events that followed the Halloween pageant? Did you think that Bob Ewell was capable of injuring Scout or Jem? How did you feel about Boo Radley's last-minute intervention?
9. What elements of this book did you find especially memorable, humorous, or inspiring? Are there individual characters whose beliefs, acts, or motives especially impressed or surprised you? Did any events in this book cause you to reconsider your childhood memories or experiences in a new light?



Reading Group Guide (2)

Spotlight on:
To Kill a Mockingbird

Discussion Questions from the National Endowment for the Arts

THE BIG READ website www.neabigread.org/books/mockingbird/mockingbird06.php

1. Why do you think Harper Lee chose as her novel's epigraph this quote from Charles Lamb: "Lawyers, I suppose, were children once"?
2. Why does the adult Scout begin her narrative with Jem's broken arm and a brief family history?
3. How does Boo Radley 's past history of violence foreshadow his method of protecting Jem and Scout? Does this aggression make him more, or less, of a sympathetic character?
4. How does the town of Maycomb function as a character with its own personality, rather than merely as a backdrop for the novel's events?
5. Atticus teaches Scout that compromise is not bending the law, but "an agreement reached by mutual consent." Does Scout apply or reject this definition of compromise? What are examples of her obedience to and defiance of this principle?
6. The novel takes place during the Great Depression. How do class divisions and family quarrels highlight racial tensions in Maycomb?
7. Atticus believes that to understand life from someone else's perspective, we must "walk in his or her shoes." From what other perspectives does Scout see her fellow townspeople?
8. How does Atticus quietly protest Jim Crow laws even before Tom Robinson's trial?
9. What does Jem learn when Atticus forces him to read to Mrs. Dubose as a punishment? Why does the lawyer regard this woman as the "bravest person" he ever knew?
10. Since their mother is dead, several women-Calpurnia, Miss Maudie, and Aunt Alexandra- function as mother figures to Scout and Jem. Discuss the ways these three women influence Scout's growing understanding of what it means to be a Southern "lady."
11. Why does Atticus Finch risk his reputation, his friendships, and his career to take Tom Robinson's case? Do you think he risks too much by putting his children in harm's way?
12. What elements of this novel did you find funny, memorable, or inspiring? Are there any characters whose beliefs or actions impressed or surprised you? Did any events lead you to revisit childhood memories or see them in a new light?
13. Adult readers may focus so much on the novel's politics that they may neglect the coming-of-age story. What does Scout learn, and how does she change in the course of her narrative?